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## Affirmative Design: An Innovative and Serious Look at Diverse Public Participation

As our communities become increasingly diverse, practitioners are continually challenged to design effective and inclusive processes. Regardless of our background and experience, we too often fail to meet this challenge – by our own measures, by our clients' expectations, and most importantly from the perspective of diverse participants.

By diversity, we mean not only the classic categories of race, gender, and age, but also of language, socioeconomic status, ethnicity, education, political affiliation, disability, religion, geographic location, sexual orientation, and so on.



## Awareness

Everyone experiences that sense of being different sometimes – you're the only woman in a group of men, our home language is not the same as most others, decisions are made based on strict parliamentary procedures and we don't know them. (Other common examples are shown in the circle graphic above.)

Even as we realize our shared experiences of being different, we often don't factor that beginning-to-be-recognized *spectrum of diversity* into our public participation designs. And processes that don't affirmatively recognize diversity can have toxic results for participants – and absolutely will reduce project success.

### Voices from the Other Side

*Below are two of the stories gathered in interviews from people "on the other side" of a process, event, or presentation that was meant to be inclusive, but wasn't. These stories help us better learn how to see and hear the other side of our designs, and to make the changes necessary to assure greater inclusivity.*

#### Story 1

"Everybody *loves* to involve community people through boards, councils, and committee meetings where you want them to come to meetings to involve citizenry, and when you get there, all of the people who are running them don't look like them, *that's* a problem. Secondly, the ones that *do* look like them don't *act* like they act, and *that's* a problem. When I say they don't act like them, it's like the situation at the <political> convention. You have to understand where

people are coming from. When you allow a waiver of a rule or the flexibility in a rule, and then you change that flexibility midstream, and you say then that it applies to everyone, and you find that once you've shut the flexibility down then the next person for whom it opens up again is European, and you give them the excuse that they don't have somebody there, therefore we have to be flexible...!

Well it seems to me that the people who *have* the people there, who *did* the right thing, who *followed* the rules, that's where the flexibility <should be>. That doesn't *invite* participation, and the word is out as a result of that convention which was pretty much *run* by European Americans -- in a pretty pluralistic community -- is that "I'm not participating anymore!" Because we never get asked to be election judges, we never are asked to be on credentials committees, we are never asked to be in the planning of it, so it becomes a very big problem. So the thing is if you're going to have real community participation across the board, then you have to have community planning across the board -- in the early stages -- and the people who are making decisions must be representative of the grassroots people that you're trying to include. So you cannot go and get a black 'Ph.Der' to represent welfare mothers -- you go and get a welfare mom to represent welfare mothers -- and *then* you'll have people who can relate."

### Story 2

"The thing that actually can affect me the most is when well-intentioned people in presentations forget that there are identifiable minorities that aren't visual. And probably the times that can be the most hurtful for me are not in an attack when people overtly say a slur term or something like that, but when they're giving examples and utilize "family" in the traditional husband-wife-children model, and forget that someone who's a member of the LGBT community may not have that."

## Affirmative Design

Affirmative Design calls upon public participation designers to proactively factor in the full spectrum of diversity, the implications of that diversity, the barriers to participation, and how to surmount those barriers -- while also being aware of the "-isms" and personal baggage that affects design choices. Affirmative design also includes regular monitoring, redesign during implementation, and rigorous evaluation.

There is a clear link between Affirmative Design and the set of core values put forth by the International Association for Public Participation ([www.iap2.org](http://www.iap2.org)), and the following two values are especially relevant:

- The public participation process communicates the interests and meets the process needs of all participants
- The public participation process seeks out and facilitates the involvement of those potentially affected

We have identified a set of straightforward principles for Affirmative Design that explicitly recognize and include a focus on the diversity that will help lead to project success:

- Determine the objectives of the project that you are supporting with public participation design
- Explicitly explore and understand the diversity of stakeholders within the project's scope (the project's *spectrum of diversity*)
- Design affirmatively for the spectrum of diversity that is critical for project success

- Monitor and redesign in real time to ensure diverse participation within the project
- Evaluate the success of the design and project results to improve long-term capacity to foster diversity

## Enhancing Your Practice

We propose that public participation practitioners use a multi-step process of Affirmative Design to explore and address the spectrum of diversity as it relates to the individuals and groups that will be affected by any given project – the project’s *spectrum of diversity*.

**Step 1:** Identify and clarify the project’s spectrum of diversity. Who will be affected by the project?

**Step 2:** Mark those that are critical for project success. Explain why.

**Step 3:** Identify and clarify barriers to effective participation (for items from Step 2).

**Step 4:** Identify and clarify ways of addressing these barriers to effective participation.

**Step 5:** List specific design actions to enhance participation for these stakeholders.

**Step 6:** How will these stakeholders respond to these actions?

**Step 7:** What are the practical, political, and cost implications of your design? How will you proceed?

Each project has a *unique spectrum of diversity*, and each practitioner will have a unique way of characterizing it. Here are some examples for your reflection:

- **Language / dialects:** Includes languages (e.g., Spanish, Hmong, Somali), as well as dialects (e.g., Australian English, Castilian Spanish, Green Hmong, White Hmong); also includes Braille, American Sign Language, and other languages for people who are blind and deaf; as well as technical jargon, and intellectual and scientific terminologies.
- **Ethnicity/culture/race:** Includes ethnic and cultural differentiations, both defined by individuals and imposed by others upon individuals who appear different. Race is widely repudiated as a valid concept, yet it still operates in everyday vernacular; common differentiations in the U.S. are a mix of old racial terms (e.g., white), new geographic references (e.g., African-American, Asian/Pacific Islander), and new linguistic groupings (e.g., Hispanic).
- **Gender:** Includes the obvious female and male differentiation, as well as more subtle transgender differentiations.
- **Communication style:** Includes extroverted and introverted styles (i.e., bold and shy), the more subtle distinctions between those who prefer to talk through ideas with others first and those who prefer to quietly think through ideas before talking about them with others.
- **Sexual orientation:** Includes heterosexual, homosexual, bisexual, and transgender diversity.
- **Religion:** Includes formal, established religions and their various sects, as well as informal religions and spiritualities; also includes atheism and agnosticism.
- **Disability:** Includes physical and psychological disabilities or handicapping conditions.
- **Education:** Includes the amount and type of formal education, degrees, or type of school (public, private, religious).
- **Political or interest group affiliation:** Includes party affiliations, political action groups or committees, unions, special interest groups.
- **Economic status:** Includes differentiations based on wealth and economic prosperity.

- **Age demographics:** Includes differentiations based on age including empirically-defined, self-defined, and socially-defined (e.g., 16, “old-enough”, a minor; 62, “young-at-heart,” social security beneficiary).
- **Learning style:** Includes different learning styles such as visual, aural, and tactile.
- **Others:** Project-specific differentiations that are relevant to the inquiry.

We are continuing to develop an *Affirmative Design Tool* that factors in both the steps and the spectrum of diversity to help practitioners think through the spectrum of diversity for a project, and design public participation that is effective and successful for all stakeholders.

## Making It Work

Affirmative Design requires real-time adjustments to be successful in the moment, and post-process evaluation from the participants’ perspectives. Practitioners can never fully anticipate the diversity that enters the process during events and the implications of that diversity. They must prepare to explicitly test, monitor, and redesign in real-time during participation events. They must also conduct a post-process evaluation that includes participants’ perspectives in order to learn and achieve long-term success.

Practitioners must ask themselves some key questions in order to make legitimate in-process changes, as well as devise thoughtful and valuable post-process evaluations:

- How can I to design more explicit real-time evaluations so that I can adjust my design to be more successful with diverse participants during an event or process?
- What kinds of evaluation questions can I respectfully ask participants that will yield honest information about their perceptions of inclusiveness?
- How can I collect more insightful detail about the spectrum of diversity and incorporate this information to improve my future work?

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